

## Critiquing an Analysis

Defense leaders make important decisions every day. Normally, these decisions are framed and guided by some sort of study, report, or decision briefing, which uses some type of analysis. Identifying and critiquing the underpinning of prepared reports is an important and necessary skill for any decision maker in the Department of Defense (and their staffs).

The purpose of the weekly assignments is to improve your ability to critique selected defense reports, studies and briefings. They will help us to help you to quickly grasp the analytical foundation of any work, evaluate it, and to offer your views on it—the key steps in critical thinking about defense analyses.

Because any defense leader—or any leader, for that matter—has limited time to spend on individual issues, a good critique must be succinct and dispassionate. Thus, your critiques are limited to 300 words. Good critiques are lean, crisp and, above all, illuminating. Good critiques also stand on their own—not requiring the reader to be intimately familiar with the analysis.

The following will help you get started:

After reading the work, and before you begin to write, try to fit the analysis into proper context. Keep in mind the setting in which a decision maker—the analysis's and its critique's consumer—will view the work.

Next, identify the key assumptions that underlie the work. Identify them explicitly (sometimes the author will help you), and decide the degree to which you agree or disagree with them. Comment on the assumptions' suitability for the analysis. If you disagree substantially with any particular assumption, note why.

Identify alternative assumption(s), if appropriate and possible. Pose at least one competitor assumption (usually, one you'd prefer), and contrast its viability.

If the work is not current, make an issue of it only if new information has become available that refutes the work. (It is generally most appropriate to view the work from the time perspective when it was done.)

If important facts are incorrect -- especially if they influence the results of the analysis -- identify and correct them. If other evidence or facts were omitted, characterize and add them.

Finally, decide whether or the author's conclusions flow from the work's logic and evidence. If not, jot down why not.

Then, write a first draft from your notes. It will likely be longer than 300 words. As you move from draft to draft, excise all unnecessary thoughts/words. It will make your critique leaner and clearer.



When writing your analysis, DON'T:

Just offer your viewpoints on the author's analysis topic.

Start writing/rambling in hopes something will come to you. Start with an idea(s), and make it clear to your reader.

Get sidetracked on a subtopic.

Stretch to fill up the word budget. Just stop. Don't repeat yourself.

The first several critiques may be difficult, but once you have done a couple and establish the necessary discipline, they'll get easier. Keep at it, and ask for help when needed.

Enjoy the class!

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